No. 50. On the New Birth.

John 3d, 3d Verse.

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

No passage perhaps in the sacred writings has produced a greater diversity of opinions, than this uttered by our Blessed Saviour. It has given rise to an infinity of interpretations, too many of them corresponding to the pre-conceived opinions of men, without ever considering to whom they were addressed. The Evangelist describes the person in a very circumstantial manner by his name, profession, office, and descent—Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a Ruler, and a Jew. He had heard our Lord's miracles often talked of in Judea; perhaps he had seen some of them; and could he have reconciled the meanness of His appearance with the grandeur of His works, he would have concluded Him to be the Messiah. Desirous therefore of obtaining information whereby to direct his judgment, he applied in person to Jesus. "Rabbi," says he,

"we know that Thou art a teacher come from God,
"for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest,
"except God be with him." To which our Saviour
answers, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee," &c. The
miracles that I do prove my mission that I am sent
from God: but I do greater miracles than any thou
hast yet seen or heard of. Thou mayst have heard
that I can restore sight to the blind, that I can give
life to those that were dead. But I am come into
the world to give eyes to those that already see, and a
new life to those that already live. I am come to
cause those that are already born to be born again—a
miracle that must be wrought in all who embrace my
Religion—for Christianity, which is "the kingdom
"of God" here below, requires such a change of heart
in both Jew and Gentile, that it may with strict pro-
priety be termed a new birth. And to shew both the
importance of the doctrine and the certainty of its truth,
He confirms it by a double asseveration, "Verily,
"verily," &c.

When the Jews received a proselyte to their Religion, he was required to forsake his father and mother, and all his connections, and to associate only with the people whose religion he had embraced. He was then said, from his having renounced idolatry and become a worshipper of the God of Abraham, to be newly born, or born again: for they alone who by birth had the privilege of worshipping God, were conceived to live; and they who were proselyted to such worship, were said to be born into a new state of existence. Our Lord therefore, alluding to these opinions, assures Nicodemus that, if he would embrace Christianity, he, like the Proselytes to the Jewish Faith, must be born again. The ruler of the Synagogue was so extremely surprized with this initiation into the Messiah's Religion, that he asks, in all the expressions of amazement—how can a man be born when he is old as I now am? Nicodemus could not reconcile the idea of regeneration or a new birth in his own nation, which was by birth the people of God;

because, as is before implied, he understood regeneration to consist in a conversion to Judaism—but our Blessed Saviour spoke of a change of opinion, and temper, and conduct. In speaking to a Jew there was a peculiar propriety in expressing this change by the idea of regeneration; as it tended to shew that their descent from Abraham was insufficient to procure them the blessings of the Gospel dispensation: the Gospel heartily embraced and thoroughly understood, will communicate or beget in them a new and a better, that is, a moral and a spiritual nature.

Our Lord, in the 23d of St. Matthew, cautions the multitude and his disciples against the gross errors, the scandalous impositions, the flagrant wickedness of the Scribes and Pharisees. They sit, says He, in Moses's seat—they are the received interpreters of his law—all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, agreeable to this law, "that observe and do; but do not "ye after their works: for they say and do not;" they are guilty of the unpardonable impudence of im-

posing by precept what they do not enforce by example. "They bind heavy burdens and grievous to be born, "and lay them on men's shoulders, but they them= "selves will not move them with one of their fingers"— alluding to those who, driving beasts of burden, when the roads are bad, support the loads and keep them even and steady. Our Lord therefore means that they will not bear these loads themselves, but that they vigorously and severely impose them on others. "Woe "unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for ye "shut up the kingdom of heaven against men, for ye "neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that "are entering to go in. Ye devour widows houses, "and for a pretence make long prayers. They shut "up the kingdom of heaven, by taking away," as St. Luke in the parallel passage explains it, Chap. 11, Verse 52. "the key of knowledge, and making "the word of God of none effect by their traditions"— under the cloke of religion they concealed every vice that defiles human nature, is destructive of the peace,

and comfort, and happineſs of society, and diſhonor-able to Almighty God.

The infamy of their private practice coincided exactly with the corruption of their public preaching. For external severities, as frequent faſting and painful mortification, and standing in the corners of the streets and in the market places, whilſt they made long prayers, they were eminently conſpicuous. But the religion which conſiſts in subduing pride, rancour, malice, covetouſneſs, they neither preached nor practiſed. They were careful to clean the outſide of the cup and platter, but they took no care to cleanſe their hearts from wicked affections. They allowed themſelves to be tranſported, as they thought they lawfully might, into violent anger and outrageous paſsion contrary to the precepts of the Goſpel, which enjoins us, "to be slow to "anger, willing to forgive, and not to let the sun go "down upon our wrath."

Such being the traditional doctrines and degenerate practice of the Jews, our Saviour tells Nicodemus,

that he must be born again—that all who would be His disciples must be moulded anew—must no longer be implacable in their resentments and depraved in their manners, but must be gentle, mild and engaging, and demonstrate, in their whole conduct, their adoption into the family of God—they must make a sacrifice as great as was required by the Jews of all who became Proselytes to their religion—only, that Christianity did not consist in appearances, but in reality. This change, which was the crucifying all his carnal and depraved affections, our Saviour calls being born again. And surely if there was a propriety in calling those men, who renounced idolatry to embrace Judaism, regenerate and new born, there was a much greater propriety in applying those terms to all who ceased to pursue the shadow, to possess the substance; who, instead of being hard-hearted, or giving alms for the purpose of being seen of men, were merciful as their Father in heaven is merciful, and loved their brethren because God had loved them—who instead of

washing their hands when they sit down to meat, and cleansing the cup and platter, cleansed their minds from pollution, and extirpated all "extortion and excess."

Now tho' we have in some degree the same vices to forsake, yet the state of a man born and educated a Christian is so widely different from that of a man proselyted to Christianity that it will not admit, without a violation of propriety, the application of the same terms. If we say to our hearers "ye must be born "again," we should speak more to your fancy than to your judgment. For allowing for a moment that a Christian is regenerate and born again in the sense some take the expression, and that he can feel and distinguish the operations of God's Spirit, which is no where asserted in Scripture—what end would be answered by it? We have seen unhappily one end answered from the supposition—the mistaking the cravings of the imagination for the operations of the Holy Spirit, and the dooming all to eternal perdition who do not think on some disputable points exactly as them-

selves. If it had been intended that we should distinguish the operations of God's Spirit from those of our own minds, we may presume that our Blessed Saviour, when He promised the assistance of the Holy-Ghost, would have drawn the lines of distinction. It appears from the writings of a late popular Preacher "who went out from us," that he had frequently confounded their several operations, 'I have 'often, says he, wrote and spoke too much in my own spirit, when I thought I was writing and speaking entirely by the assistance of the Spirit of God!' (See Whitfield's Letter to the excellent Author of the Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists compared.) God grant, my Brethren, that none of us may be so audacious as to take such indecent liberties with the blessed Spirit! May such a confession, whilst we admire its ingenuousness, be a warning to us not to arrogate to ourselves too much of God's especial favor! May we rather be careful "to do justly, to love mercy, and "to walk humbly with our God!"

And is this, it may be asked, all that is meant by being born again? To which we answer, yes, it is all—and we add, that it is devoutly to be wished that every Minister of the Gospel, instead of using such figurative expressions, would exhort his hearers in terms more plain and significant—for they are more significant in a country where we are baptized into the profession of Christianity—to forsake their sins and to lead a new life. Such preaching, were it universal, would put an end to that "strife about words," which contaminates, distracts, destroys the purity, the unanimity, the efficacy of the Church of Christ."

Let me here observe that, in the office of Baptism, our Church confines, with great justice, regeneration and new birth to our being baptized and admitted into the profession of Christianity. "We yield Thee hearty "thanks, most merciful Father, that it hath pleased "Thee to regenerate this infant with thy Holy Spirit." And again—"this child is now, by the laver or "washing of regeneration in baptism, received into the

"number of the children of God." Which expreſsions seem to be taken from the exhortation to St. Paul, when he was miraculouſly converted from Judaiſm to Chriſtianity—"ariſe and be baptized, and waſh away "thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." Every perſon therefore who is admitted into the profeſsion of Chriſtianity, is born again and regenerated with God's Holy Spirit. And every perſon who performs, according to his ability, what was promiſed and vowed for him in his baptiſm, "shall be an inheritor of "the kingdom of heaven." Now as thoſe who lead wicked lives derive little or no advantage from regeneration whilſt they live wickedly, so if "they turn away "from their wickedneſs, and do that which is lawful "and right, they shall save their souls alive." This renewed state is very improperly called by some people, a converted or a regenerate state—which applies only to the Gentiles in the infancy of the Goſpel, when "they "turned from dead works to serve the living God," and to the Jews who acknowledged Jeſus to be the Meſsiah,

or as the Scriptures express it, "who believed in Him."

But as we are said "to be led by the Spirit, and "that the Spirit of God dwells in our hearts by faith," it may be thought that something more is meant than merely leading a new life—to which it may be answered, that every man who desires the salvation of his soul will receive the assistance of the Spirit of God, and will daily qualify his heart more and more for the reception and abiding of God's Holy Spirit: he will pray, and his prayers will be heard and granted, that "God will put a new spirit within him; that he "will take the stony heart out of his flesh, and will "give him an heart of flesh, to the end that he may "walk in God's statutes, and keep His ordinances and "do them, that he may be His child, and that God "may be his God." In descending into himself, if he find his disposition to be perverse, he immediately sets himself to correct it—if he be obstinate, peevish, sullen, censorious, malicious, passionate, covetous, inflexible, he has the assurance of the Gospel, that whilst he in-

dulges such a temper, he cannot be a child of God, and that God cannot inhabit such a pollated breast. He therefore "brings forth the fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, "peace, long suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, "meekness, temperance." Thus living under the influence of the Gospel a new turn is given to the current of his thoughts, new affections are raised in his mind, and the passions of his heart are determined and regulated in another and a better manner. Call such an one, if you please, regenerate and born again—I only say you use the terms improperly:—the Scriptures stile Barnabas, who was "full of the Holy Ghost, "a good man." And indeed there is a strong objection against addressing either individuals or assemblies under the titles of believers, saints, regenerate, the called; such distinctions having a natural tendency to inspire human nature with rigour, singularity, uncharitableness, and spiritual pride—the very vices we are to renounce before we can derive any benefits from the dispensation of the Gospel, or in the words of the

text, before we can see the kingdom of God. That you have the Spirit of God give this evidence—go on from one degree of excellence to another, and die daily unto sin and live unto righteousness.

Having shewn what our Saviour meant when He said to Nicodemus, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God, and that the words literally understood cannot be applied to us who live under the dispensation of the Gospel—let me briefly exhort you to cease to do evil, and to learn to do well—words of the same awful import to us as were those addressed by our Blessed Saviour to Nicodemus—unless ye are born again, ye cannot see the kingdom of God.

Did our Saviour say to a Jew by birth, "ye "must be born again"—we say to you "who by bap- "tism are regenerate and born again"—"if ye die "in your sins ye will perish." The Jews drew upon them the displeasure of God by assuming much consequence and superiority, by indulging pride, rancour,

and malice, by their extortion and rapacity. They qualified indeed these "works of the Devil" by their long and frequent prayers, by their zeal in proselyting the Gentiles to the Jewish Faith, by their regularity in "paying tithe of mint, anise, and cummin, omitting "the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and "faith—thus straining at a gnat and swallowing a "camel." The same vices will draw on us the displeasure of God. In vain shall we attempt to commute with heaven by the observance of some easy virtues. Whatever a Christian does is to be done "as "seeing Him who is invisible"—as if God were visibly present to express His approbation, or manifest His displeasure. Whoever embraces Christianity, from the persuasion that he is redeemed "by the pre-"cious blood of Christ," will endeavor to "become holy "in all manner of conversation and godliness. Do we live under this divine influence! Do we regulate our tempers, mortify our carnal inclinations, and avoid sin in whatever shape it presents itself to us?

Do we cultivate and nourish religious affections? Do we delight ourselves in the worship and service of God, and pay an equal obedience to all His commandments? In a word, are we His people, and can we truly say that He is our God? And were we now called to give an account of our lives—in what manner could we appear before Him in whose presence no evil dwelleth? He requires us to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit—and if we disappoint His expectations, He has declared what the consequence of our conduct shall be—"weeping, and wailing, and "gnashing of teeth!"

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